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## WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM: STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE IRANIAN REVOLT

NONPOLITICS FEMINISM, IRANIAN REVOLT, REVOLUTION, RIOT, WOMEN

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Over a month after a historic feminist revolt broke out in Iran, what is

the significance of these protests? What strategic lessons can we take from the experience of the Iranian Revolution to push this struggle toward a victory?

Over 40 days have passed since the brutal murder of Mahsa Jina Amini shook Iran to its core and opened up the largest anti-government protests in the country since 2009. It is a tradition in Shia Islam to mark the 40th day, or chehellom, after the death of a loved one with a celebration. Tens of thousands of Iranians traveled to Amini's Kurdish hometown in Saqqez to protest and to commemorate her chehellom. Despite road blockades, floods of people walked on foot to visit her grave.

This is just one of the many images that have captured the attention of international media over the past month. Like George Floyd almost two years ago, Mahsa Jina Amini has become an international symbol of resistance. Her death has ignited working people across Iran – university students and schoolchildren, Kurds, Balochis, Arabs, Persians, Azeris, Lurs, and Turkmens hand-in-hand. The world has watched their fearlessness in the face of the regime's ruthless repression.

So far, at least 250 have been killed, 900 injured, and 12,500 arrested, although official numbers are hard to come by. The repression has been particularly bad in Sistan and Baluchestan Province and Kurdistan Province, which are important regions for Iran's ethnic minorities. Internet curfews continue, but despite the shutdowns, Iran's tech-savvy youth continue to find ways to transmit their struggle to the rest of the world. Yet, sadly, it's the same youth who have been the primary targets of repression; protesters as young as 11 have been killed by the regime's live ammunition.

Among the arrested, many are political and worker activists. On October 15, a fire broke out at Evin prison, which many protesters consider to have been provoked by the regime as a way to intimidate the movement. Evin is the primary detention center for political dissidents and opponents of the regime, and it is also known as the "University of Evin" because so many anti-government intellectuals, artists, and activists are detained there.

Though the regime has been steadfast in its brutal crackdown on protesters, day by day, a crisis of legitimacy is being intensified by the revolt, and it continues to develop. Even prominent hardliners have had to concede some of the movement's points. Take, for example, Ali Larijani, a former speaker of the Iranian parliament who has been part of the top echelons of power since the 1979 revolution, and at one time was a candidate to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader. He has called for a reexamination of the enforcement of compulsory hijab law and for the

regime to lessen its repression on protesters.

Another example of growing ruling-class divisions can be seen among the clerics who make up Iran's Shia clerical oligarchy. Grand Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat-Zanjani, a senior cleric, recently criticized the "morality police," which he considers illegal and contrary to Islam.

An anonymous cleric from the Shia holy city of Qom (which has also been the site of protests) told Middle East Eye in early October that "the majority in the Qom seminary, or at least a large percentage of clerics, are increasingly against the Islamic Republic, because it has both weakened Islam and clerics in the eyes of people," he said. "This is while many clerics have no relations with the establishment and have been distancing themselves from its politics, as they don't want to be seen as part of the Islamic Republic."

While it remains to be seen to what extent the unrest will further divide the regime, this wave of protests has already proved to be one of the most complex challenges to the mullahs' bourgeois regime since its inception in 1979. What makes this revolt significant in the context of Iran's crisis?

#### Characterizing the Revolt

What started as a feminist uprising – breathing to life the now international slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" – has quickly evolved into a larger anti-government revolt. In many ways, these current protests are a continuation of the anti-government protests of 2017 and 2019 in Iran (and also in the countries of Iran's sphere of influence, like Lebanon and Iraq) – which put forward the similar slogan of "Bread, Work, Freedom." This wave of class struggle in many ways had put the spotlight on the growing anti-neoliberal sentiment around the world and was directly tied to the struggle against austerity and the high cost of living.

Unlike the Green Movement in 2009, which was reformist, led by the middle class, and mostly contained to Iran's major cities, this more recent wave of protests in Iran explicitly call for the downfall of the regime (even if it's still unclear what will replace it), and they are primarily made up of working-class people. Against a backdrop of a creeping crisis of capitalism, which has had its ebbs and flows since 2008, the postpandemic landscape, marked by the war in Ukraine and high inflation, is also triggering a new wave of class struggle against the global cost-of-living crisis.

Semicolonies like Iran often bear the brunt of capitalism's crisis (as the vaccine hoarding of the world's richest countries demonstrated) because they are fundamentally subordinated to global capitalism and imperialism's aggressiveness. Despite Iran's status as a regional power, its economic

and military might still pale in comparison to the imperialist countries.

Moreover, Iran is contending with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. Iran was a notorious epicenter of the pandemic and its impact on the economy was so severe that the Iranian regime was forced to make an unprecedented request to the IMF for an emergency loan of US\$5 billion. And while the regime's mismanagement exacerbated the pandemic's worst effects, the double jeopardy of the West's "maximum pressure" sanctions and the coronavirus battered the working class and poorest sectors of Iranian society. These sanctions continue today.

With these elements in play, it's no wonder that Iran has been in an almost constant state of protest since the most severe pandemic restrictions were eased. In that sense, the current uprising can be seen as an apex of a social crisis that has been brewing long before last month.

What many did not foresee is that this brewing social discontent would be seized most prominently by working women in a country where the female labor force participation is one of the lowest in the world, but where, paradoxically, over 60 percent of university graduates and holders of higher education are Iranian women. In addition to patriarchal oppression, many women in Iran are subjected not only to gender oppression but also to economic insecurity.

Beyond these structural factors, the subjectivity of women in Iran must be seen in the context of a post-#MeToo era and a revitalized global feminist movement made up of women and trans, queer, and nonbinary people who are facing different yet interrelated attacks.

Another prominent feature of these protests is the unity of the diverse sectors in struggle, among the genders, Iranians and their diaspora (which has organized protests in over 150 cities around the world, including a protest of over 80,000 people in Berlin), various ethnic groups, but also among the different generations. Iran's Gen-Z, or daheh-ye hashtadiha, has been on the front lines of these protests and is coming of age during Iran's recent protest movements but also poignantly the BLM protests which broadened the imagination of a new generation of radicalized youth around the world. Over 40 percent of Iran's population is under 24 years old, and youth unemployment also runs rampant.

Another characteristic that can't be ignored is the presence and activity of the working class, which has a strong presence in this movement but has so far organized only limited independent actions. Currently, the teachers' unions and contract workers in the oil industry are among the most prominent sectors to organize in response to the protests. In recent

years, Iran has seen a rise in labor militancy from sectors as diverse as petrochemicals, trucking, and heavy equipment.

Importantly, the emergence of these protests have pushed many of these sectors to tie together democratic and political questions with economic ones. Alongside this dynamic, workers are also self-organizing in the tradition of the incipient bodies of self-organization that emerged during the revolution. These shoras exist not only in workplaces but also in universities and neighborhoods.

#### The Path to Iran's Next Revolution

Despite all of the progressive elements of the Iranian revolt, the strategic question remains whether the working class and the mass movement (which emerged spontaneously) can advance in their consciousness and organization to open a revolutionary situation along an independent path. In other words, how do the protests overcome their revoltist character without being strategically diverted by domestic and foreign bourgeois forces?

Here, we can turn back to the history of class struggle in Iran, using the Iranian revolution, our most advanced experience, to draw lessons and find a way forward, especially as Iranians continue their struggle against their bondage to repressive bourgeois regimes and the imperialist system that upholds them.

One of the most important lessons we can draw is that the working class has decisive power and that organization must play a role, as we saw in the general strike that workers organized through the shoras to bring the shah's regime to its knees. This idea runs counter to postmodern notions that have been borrowed heavily by neoliberal ideology, that is, that the working class irrelevant as a subject or is merely a cultural facet that makes up a broader subset of "citizenry" or "the people."

Rather, it emphasizes the working class as a revolutionary subject (that the proletariat has social power to lead a revolution to its victory) and the pertinence of workers' hegemony as a political strategy that has the working class put its social power at the service of the needs of all social sectors affected by capitalism and uniting these different sectors that are fundamentally struggling against the same enemy by taking up their demands.

In relation to this, the dynamics of the theory of permanent revolution are also relevant here and were on full display during the Iranian revolution. In the decisive movements of class struggle during the revolution, where the question of power was posed between the bourgeoisie and the working class, the workers in struggle didn't stop at their

democratic aspirations against the shah's authoritarian regime. Instead, they put production under workers' control at the service of the movement. In other words, through this brief experience, workers were beginning to realize that the way out of the misery that had been imposed on them was in their own hands.

The shoras, which also highlighted the importance of organization to coordinate between the sectors in struggle, also demonstrated what real democracy looks like and how society could be organized, based on this kind of democracy, in which workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and even rural communities can democratically decide everything about how society runs.

Unfortunately, the experience of the Iranian revolution was cut short due to a process of repression and counterrevolution, at the hands of the Islamic regime which counted on the destabilizing influence of Western imperialism working covertly to prevent a workers' revolution. At the same time, much of the Left was unable to politically challenge the Islamists, whether it was because they supported Khomeini's regime through a stageist conception of revolutions or because they were confused about the character of Khomeini's program.

Some thinkers, like Foucault (echoing the ideas of contemporaries like Laclau and Mouffe), fell victim to analyzing the new regime primarily at the level of discourse, because they rejected class analysis, instead advocating a "progressive" populist discourse, which Khomeini was adept at deploying – merging concepts of the Left with pan-Iranian, Shia ideas. In ignoring the class content of Khomeini's program, much of the Left, including the Marxist Left, politically subordinated itself to the new regime's fundamentally bourgeois program.

Based on this history, we can draw the following lessons for today:

1. The working class, which controls the strategic positions that keep society running, not the abstract categories of "citizens" or "people," has the decisive power to unite the sectors in struggle. Consequently, the absence of workers' hegemony means that the movement will express itself in this "citizen" form, even though many of its protagonists are part of the working class.
2. We should advocate for democratic bodies of self-organization at every conjuncture. These bodies could be the seeds of future workers' councils that could eventually put the control of the entire economy in the hands of working people, so that the resources of the country are developed and distributed according to the needs of the majority of society.

3. Without promoting the idea that workers' hegemony and soviet-type organizations develop spontaneously as class struggle intensifies, the construction of a revolutionary political organization is a key task for revolutionaries. Instead of leaving the vacuum of political leadership open to be hegemonized by counterrevolutionary forces, the formation of an independent, working-class leadership that fights for leadership in democratic bodies, that can organize the vanguard of struggles with its political perspective, and that puts forward a program to confront the entire bourgeois regime is fundamental to the movement's success.

4. Unleashing the potential of this movement and opening the road from revolt to revolution also depends on the subjectivity of the international working class. Not only morally but also strategically, the question of supporting Iranian workers and the oppressed depends on the activity and organization of workers and the oppressed around the world, particularly in imperialist countries. Our struggles as working people are inextricably linked to one another, and Mahsa Jina Amini's death, or the murder of another member of our class, could be the spark that lights a fire around the world.

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